

Soldiers
Online



Fife and Drum Corps members (*from left to right*) SSG Mark Chavez, SSG Michael Creadon and SFC George Granofsky help preserve the musical history of the Continental Army by playing one-valve bugles.



Sounds of the Army's Past

Celebrating the Army's
226th
Birthday

Story by Beth Reece
Photos by Paul Disney

THE commands are often silent. Waists never swing. Heel to toe, these Continental-style musicians can march in circles — sweat stinging their eyes or wind fluttering the locks of their white wigs. Revolutionary tunes spill from memory as steps are counted and lines kept straight.

Soldiers of The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps showcase the past by parading in the style of Revolutionary Army units. With precise drill steps and Colonial tunes that once directed troops into battle or raised their spirits on long, dusty marches, the 70-member corps casts a patriotic elegance over official ceremonies and historical celebrations.

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Contributing photographer Paul Disney works for the Fort Belvoir, Va., public affairs office.



Drummer SSG Brian Barnhart and fifer SFC Keith Edwards are suitably attired in period red coats, tricorne hats and white wigs.

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“We keep the heritage of the American revolution alive,” said snare drummer SGT Joshua Dukes. “Veterans often thank us for remembering the past even though sometimes it’s not really their own past being portrayed.”

The FDC is the only unit of its kind in the armed forces, created in 1960 and assigned to the Army’s oldest active-duty unit — the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment at Fort Myer, Va. The corps memorializes the musical history of George Washington’s Continental Army, which received battlefield commands musically — through drums, fifes and bugles. Their songs are borrowed from field manuals and music dating prior to 1820.

As strongly as their music rings across parade fields, the FDC also lures audiences into the past with red regimental coats, tricorne hats and white wigs. The leading drum major issues speechless commands with an esponton — a weapon carried by 18th century officers.

Preserving America’s Heritage

Preserving the past comes easily to fifer and music history scholar SSG Susan Moser.

“The movie *The Patriot* shows how much of a changing time the period was. I’m fascinated that musicians were so important back then, and I think it’s great that women are a part of this tradition today,” she said. By early-American custom, only children and old men unfit to fight performed in Continental field bands.

Today, the FDC shares America’s military heritage at White House and Pentagon ceremonies welcoming the arrival of national leaders and government officials, as well as during general-officer retirements and changes of command. And starting with President John F. Kennedy in 1961, the FDC sounds off as a lead musical attraction at presidential inaugural parades.

To remind America of its historical roots, the FDC also performs by special request at schools and scouting events throughout the United States. Merrier appearances include such major sporting events as the Super Bowl, the Kentucky Derby and the 1980 Winter Olympics.

Although the corps is famous for

lending a spirit of national pride to the events it supports, President George W. Bush's January inauguration challenged that reputation when protestors' boos threatened to drown out some musical performances during the parade.

"Out of patriotism, we all kept raising the volume to block out the noise. The whole band was inspired despite the protestors," said bugler SSG Ricardo Rosales, a two-year member.

In between presidents and generals,

The corps memorializes the musical history of George Washington's Continental Army, which received battlefield commands musically — through drums, fifes and bugles. Their songs are borrowed from field manuals and music dating prior to 1820.

the FDC gives an occasional show for Hollywood legends. SSG Cecelia Becker boasts a favorite photograph of her standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Tom Hanks in June 2000 after the dedication of a D-Day Museum in New Orleans, La.

Glamour aside, soldiers' admiration holds an esteemed place in band members' hearts.

"We're one of them," said Becker, whose FDC performances welcomed soldiers home to their bases and thankful families throughout Germany after the end of Operation Desert Storm in 1992.

FDC SGM John Oktavec said his soldiers perform each show as if it's more important than the one before it. "Whether in front of schools or heads of state, they represent the country, the military, the Army. These soldiers constantly push to give the best and most polished performance every time."

Merging Sound and Step

Perfection is the FDC's long admired, unforgiving trademark. Instrumentalists spend six months memorizing about 80 songs and mastering the unit's intricate drill steps before joining the ranks. Leader's eyes incessantly beg precision, and members learn that perfection is a product of repetition, especially for moves like counter-marching.

Six months after training, SGT Karl Sauter drums tunes without consciously connecting the notes. "I don't have to think about the music anymore since it's basically muscle memory for me. Now I can focus entirely on marching."

Rehearsals fill each band member's days. The soldiers practice solo, then sections gradually join until all elements play seamlessly as one. The



Drum major SFC Anthony Hoxworth leads the Fife and Drum Corps through a rehearsal.



The troop step is one of the corps' trademark moves. Instrumentalists spend about six months memorizing songs and learning the unit's intricate drill steps.

complications of merging sound and step demand the most time. Precision cannot be overstated and details count.

"The drum majors are very picky, knit-picking at everything — every sound, every look, the music, the marching. There is constant checking to make sure instruments are straight and footwork is accurate," said Rosales.

Mother Nature has a gift for poking fun at these long practices. Add freezing temperatures or a blazing sun to the event and several things change. Uniforms may become sweaty burdens or fingers may stiffen with cold. But a fainting soldier is rare. "We strive to be in the best mental and physical shape so we can project the perfect image," Moser said.

Getting Into the Crown Jewel

Some band members' descriptions make joining the FDC seem like an

elusive dream, impossible to obtain even for the most committed musician.

Oktavec calls the unit an instrument-
alist's "crown jewel." Out of about 24 finalists a year, only six succeed. Twenty-six current members made the FDC team after working in Army field bands or other job specialties. The other 44 enlisted into the FDC directly from civilian music organizations.

Sauter said he spent most of his 10-year Army career as a cook before trading in his spoons for drumsticks. Since the Army is short on food specialists, branch managers were reluctant to lose him. But after hearing and seeing Sauter's audition, FDC leaders campaigned hard to get him transferred.

Opening the FDC's door was a seven-year venture for Dukes, who still remembers watching the unit perform for the first time when he was only 14 during a nationwide fife and drum corps muster. "From that day on I wanted to perform with the Army Fife and Drum Corps," he said.

Dukes got his first break auditioning on drums at age 17. Although named one of three finalists, he wasn't chosen. So he joined the Army as a Patriot missile crewmember and was assigned to Fort Bliss, Texas. In spring 2000, Dukes traveled to Fort Myer for an equipment presentation, and could not resist popping into the FDC Headquarters in hopes of picking up where he left off years ago.

"The first person I saw when I entered the headquarters building was the man who is now my boss. He remembered me from my first audition and with hardly any hesitation said, 'Hey, we've got another slot open.

Why don't you audition tomorrow?'" Even though he hadn't played for three years, Dukes accepted the challenge.

In a hotel that night, the nervous soldier beat on a coffee table protected by a mouse pad to muffle the rhythmic thumps. "I am living my childhood dream. I'm proud every time I put on the uniform," Dukes confided. Later this summer he will journey to his hometown, Millbrook, N.Y., to perform at the same national muster at



Campaign banners cover a rope-tensioned drum being played by SSG Brian Barnhart using the rudimentary style of Revolutionary War-era drummers.

which the FDC stole his heart in 1993. Mom and Dad will watch him perform for the first time.

Sauter and Dukes' pride is a virtue that Oktavec admires in every FDC soldier he's worked with in 29 years. Trickling down from the valiant ranks of Washington's Continental Army, the allegiance to share America's independent glory is yet alive, Oktavec said. And, if you add a member of the 1970s corps to the corps of 2001 — pride and precision still prevail.

"I still love standing beside the corps and looking down the ranks," Oktavec said. "Everyone is dressed just right. Footsteps are exact. Music is right on. Performing doesn't get any better than this." □